

# Spartan and Athenian government

# 5

In this chapter you will be investigating the following issues:

- the nature of oligarchy and democracy
- differences between the Spartan and Athenian systems of government

## Oligarchy versus democracy

In the fifth century BC, the Spartan form of government was an **oligarchy** and the Athenian system was a **democracy**.

Sparta was called an oligarchy because the body with the most power in the state was a council of 30 men. This was called the *gerousia* and was made up of 28 men over 60 plus the two Spartan kings. These Spartan elders were members of the *gerousia* for as long as they lived. Another reason why Sparta was called an oligarchy was because only a few thousand Spartan citizens controlled a huge population who had no political rights.

Athens was called a democracy because the main body that passed the laws and made other important decisions was the people's assembly. Every citizen, no matter what his class or income, could attend and vote on whether something should become law or not.

The Spartans were happy with their form of government because they respected their elders and those in authority. However, not everyone in Athens supported democracy. There were advantages and disadvantages in each of these systems.

In Australia we have a democratic form of government but it is different from the government in ancient Athens. Try to imagine every citizen in Australia attending parliament in Canberra or every citizen in NSW turning up to state parliament in Sydney to have his or her say. It would be impossible. Instead, we vote for people to stand in for us or represent us in Canberra and Sydney. These politicians are supposed to look after our interests. This is called representative democracy.

### Exploring the issues

- 1 From the information provided by source 5.2, explain the advantages of having a small body of elders running the government. What might be some of the disadvantages?
- 2 What was the best thing about Athenian democracy?

### Some Greek words and their meanings

5.1

Greek word	Meaning
<i>oligos</i>	few or small
<i>archia</i>	rule or government
<i>demos</i>	the people
<i>kratos</i>	rule or strength

### Using the information

Use source 5.1 to give the meaning of the words 'oligarchy' and 'democracy'.

### The type of person chosen to be a member of the Spartan council

5.2

Whenever an elder died, his place should be taken by the man over sixty whose merits were regarded as most outstanding ... a man was to be chosen, not as the swiftest of swift men nor the strongest of strong ones, but as the best and wisest of the good and the wise.

Plutarch, *The Life of Lycurgus*, cited in *Plutarch on Sparta*, Penguin, 1988, p 38.

**democracy** rule by the people  
**oligarchy** rule by the few